

[“In the flesh”: Recovering the lost grammar of Paul in Galatians in light of echos in Hebrews](#)

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For your consideration and critique: a thesis.

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Thesis: The following series of grammatical possibilities in Galatians is both interconnected and echoed.

Within the epistle, the series is interconnected around Paul’s idea of living life “NOW IN THE FLESH” by participation in the faithfulness of Jesus.

The interconnected series is echoed in Hebrews. Hebrews does not echo Paul’s ambiguous grammar, but echoes both the language of Paul, and the meanings produced if (and only if) the grammatical ambiguities are understood in these particular ways.

Furthermore, all the echoes are interconnected around the anonymous author’s idea of Jesus “in the days of his flesh.”

Understood as a first century reader-response to Galatians from within the Pauline school, the interconnected echo in Hebrews provides evidence (and maybe even “proof”) that these particular grammatical construals are probably the ones Paul and his first readers would have taken for granted.

A Series of Grammatical Possibilities:

- All with reference to living “now in the flesh”,
- all significantly different from standard interpretations (in, for example the ESV and the NIV)
- and all resulting in echoes in Hebrews

Instead of "faith in": Galatians 2:20

"I have been co-crucified with Christ, and I no longer who live, but Christ who lives in me. And so the life which I now live **IN THE FLESH**, in the faithfulness I live -- that of God’s Son (νῦν ζῶ ἐν σαρκί, ἐν πίστει ζῶ τῇ τοῦ Υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ), who loved me and gave himself for me."

It is grammatically possible that Paul was saying that “in the flesh” and in the “now”, his “life” was manifesting the “faithfulness of” God’s Son. Such a sense of “in the flesh” union with the life of Jesus is similar in meaning to a claim Paul makes in 2 Corinthians:

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we the living are always being delivered to death on account of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:10-11).

Instead of sarcastically asking “are you now being made perfect in the flesh?”: Galatians 3:1-5

"O unperceptive Galatians!... I wish only to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing of faith? In this, you are so unperceptive!

Having begun in the Spirit, now IN THE FLESH you are being made perfect (ἐναρξάμενοι Πνεύματι νῦν σαρκὶ ἐπιτελεῖσθε). You have suffered so many things in vain, if indeed in vain. Therefore, the One supplying to you the Spirit and working miracles among you, is it out of works of the Law, or out of hearing of faith?"

It is grammatically possible that the phrase "now in the flesh" (νῦν σαρκὶ) carries the same meaning as Paul's previous usage of the same words: "now ... in the flesh" ("νῦν... ἐν σαρκί" Gal. 2:20).

If so, the sentence is a word of encouragement, a blessing. In this rereading, when Paul reminded the audience that "now in the flesh" they were "being made perfect," he was implicitly speaking of their participation in the life of Jesus.

He lamented their seeming inability to perceive that this "miracle" was happening not by "works of the law," but "by hearing of faith."

They had indeed suffered a lot (this sort of "being made perfect" entailed suffering), but Paul wanted to assure them that such suffering was not in vain.

Their suffering was toward an end, a telos, it was an integral part of a process of completion, a legitimately difficult process of maturation.

This usage is similar to Paul's word of encouragement in Philippians where he employs the same pair of arche and telos words:

"The One having begun (ἐναρξάμενος) a good work in you will carry it on to perfection (ἐπιτελέσει)..." (Phil. 1:6)

Paul modeled striving toward such a perfection while being cautious about claiming to have already attained it (Phil. 3:7-17).

Notably, also in Philippians, Paul spoke of his life "in the flesh," as a sphere suited for "fruitful work" (Phil. 1:22).

Instead of "though my condition was a trial to you": Galatians 4:12-15

"Become as I, since I also [have become] as you, brothers, I beg you. You have done me no wrong, but you know that it was because of [your] fleshly weakness that I first preached to you, and [you know that it was because of] your temptation IN MY FLESH (καὶ τὸν πειρασμὸν ὑμῶν ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου) that you did not count as nothing or despise [me], but you received me, as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. Where therefore is your blessedness? For I bear witness that if possible you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me."

It is grammatically possible that when Paul said "I [have become] as you" he was speaking of the ongoing consequences of a pivotal event that took place prior to his arrival in Galatia: He, a "Jew by birth" (that is "according to the flesh") had been given an experience of the same kind of "fleshly weakness" and "temptation" typically experienced by "Gentile sinners" (Gal. 2:15f).

The Galatians received him with a striking intensity which Paul describes in symbolic language. Paul says that they received him “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.”

In this rereading, their response was on account of what they saw and heard through their encounter with the apostle “in the flesh” -- through the faith of Christ, who had “loved” and “given himself” for him, the apostle had been empowered to live in faithfulness in the midst of “weakness” and “temptation” just like theirs.

Paul calls the temptation “your temptation”, meaning the type of temptation the Galatian “brothers” had experienced as Gentile sinners.

Paul goes on to describe their response symbolically: “if possible you would have gouged out their eyes and given them to me.”

The idea of gouging out one’s own eyes and offering them points to a spirit of willingness to crucify “the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24).

The eyes are symbolic of “fleshly desire” (Gal. 5:16, Cf. 1 John 2:16, also Matt. 18:9).

Such an intense response to the gospel conforms to Paul’s exhortation in Romans: “ ... present your bodies a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1).

Instead of "called to freedom": Galatians 5:13

"I wish those upsetting you also will cut themselves off! For you were called brothers on condition of freedom: only this freedom is not for an opportunity **IN THE FLESH** (ἐπ’ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἐκλήθητε ἀδελφοί· μόνον μὴ τὴν ἐλευθερίαν εἰς ἀφορμὴν τῇ σαρκί, ἀλλὰ); but, through love, be slaves to one another. For the entire Law is fulfilled in this one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, take heed, lest you might be consumed by one another.”

It is grammatically possible that Paul was reminding his Galatian audience that it was only “on condition of” their “freedom” in the faith of Christ that he was able to “call” them “brothers.”

Paul thought his opponents wanted to turn the “freedom” of the “brothers” into “an opportunity in the flesh” -- meaning they wanted to compel the “brothers” to be circumcised (“Circumcision of the flesh of your foreskin” Gen. 17:11) to make a good impression, to boast “in the flesh” of “the brothers” (ἐν τῇ ὑμετέρᾳ σαρκί), and to avoid persecution “for the cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:12-13).

Earlier in the epistle, Paul made it clear how he responded to such “false brothers” -- of “the circumcision” -- who had spied out their “freedom” in order to “enslave” them -- he refused to “give in to them for a moment” (Gal. 2:4-13).

For Paul, brotherly love happens “in the flesh.”

Thus, Paul could write to Philemon that he should take back his slave Onesimus “no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Phil. 1:16).

Clarified with reference to Philemon 1:16, and Galatians 6:13, the sense of Galatians 5:13 may be paraphrased as follows:

“For it was on condition of freedom that you were called brothers [in the flesh and in the Lord]; only this freedom is not for an opportunity in the flesh [ie “They want you to be circumcised, so that they may boast in your flesh”]; instead, through love be slaves to one another [imitating the faithfulness of God's son, who loved and gave himself].”

An Interconnected Series of Echos In Hebrews

(All related to the life of Jesus “in the days of his flesh”)

1. ... I bear the marks of Jesus
2. in my body. (Galatians 6:17)
3. But we do gaze on the one
4. who for a time was made lower than the angels,
5. Jesus... (Hebrews. 2:9)

“Faithfulness” of Jesus echoed:

When it is understood that “In the flesh” the apostle Paul was manifesting the “faithfulness” of Jesus, and doing so as a model worthy of imitation, the image of Jesus in Galatians 2:20, is echoed in Hebrews where Jesus is explicitly called “faithful” -- “... faithful to the one who sent him” (Heb. 2:2, Cf 12:2).

In Hebrews, the faith(fulness) of Jesus is participatory:

“Now we strongly desire that each of you show the same eagerness for the fullness of hope until the end, so that you may not become lazy, but imitators of those who through faith(fulness) and patience inherit the promises” (6:11-12).

“Remember your leaders, who spoke to you the word of God; in reflecting on the outcome of their conduct imitate their faith(fulness).” (Heb. 13:7).

“Being made perfect” as a legit process echoed:

When the language of beginning and perfecting, arche and telos, is read as a word of encouragement, and living “now in the flesh” is perceived as participation in the suffering of Jesus, Galatians 3:3 is echoed in Hebrews:

“For it is fitting that he [God]... in leading many sons to glory, should perfect (τελειῶσαι) the originator (τὸν ἀρχηγόν) of their salvation through sufferings (παθημάτων).” (Heb. 2:10).

“... let us trace the course which lies before and do it with patience, keeping our eyes on the initiator (ἀρχηγόν) and perfecter (τελειωτήν) of our faith, Jesus ... ” (Heb. 12:2)

“Who, in the days of his flesh, having offered with a loud cry and tears prayers and petitions to the one able to save him from death, and having been heard because of his reverence even

though son, learned from the things he suffered obedience, and once brought to perfection became for all those who obeyed him cause for eternal salvation ..." (Heb. 5:7-9).

"... leaving behind the word of the beginning (τῆς ἀρχῆς) about the Christ, let us move on to what is most perfect (τὴν τελειότητα), not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and faith in God..." (Heb. 6:1).

"Becoming as" in respect to "your weakness" and "your temptation" in the sphere of the "flesh" echoed:

When we see Jesus manifested "in the flesh" of the apostle Paul, who, although he had been raised Jewish, "became like" a Gentile sinner in "fleshly weakness" and "temptation" just like theirs, Galatians 4:12-15 is echoed in Hebrews.

This idea of an apostle "becoming as" his audience in terms of "temptation" just like theirs in the sphere of "the flesh" is echoed in the portrait of Jesus:

"Since, therefore, the children share blood and flesh, he [Jesus] likewise partook in the same... he had to be like his 'brothers' in every way... For in what he suffered in his temptation he is able to help those being tempted... Therefore, holy brothers, partakers of the heavenly calling, carefully consider Jesus, the apostle..." (2:14, 17, 18, and 3:1, Cf. 4:15).

Being "called brothers" echoed:

When interpreted grammatically as a description of being "called brothers" (ἐκλήθητε, ἀδελφοί) on condition of participation in the "freedom" of the faithfulness of Jesus, Galatians 5:13 is echoed in Hebrews:

"... both the one sanctifying and those being sanctified are all from one; for which reason he [Jesus] is not ashamed to call (καλεῖν) them brothers (ἀδελφούς), saying 'I shall announce your name to my brothers, in the midst of the assembly I shall sing your praise.'" (Heb. 2:11).

Instead of leaning away from the echoes:

There is a traditional tendency to avoid perceiving echos of Galatians in interpretations of the image of Jesus "in the days of his flesh" in Hebrews.

I had to unlearn that!

I now think the author of Hebrews assumed familiarity with Galatians among his readers.

My approach in this re-construal is to lean into the echo.

The echos in Hebrews provide first-century reader-response evidence (perhaps even "proof") that the grammar of Galatians, thus re-construed, would have been taken for granted by Paul and his first readers.

Conclusion

To "see Jesus" as the author of Hebrews did -- "in the days of his flesh" -- it is ideal to have imaginatively taken a seat among the Galatians, to have "seen Jesus" manifested IN THE FLESH of the apostle Paul, and by imitation of his faithfulness in temptation, to have become a participant in "the life of Jesus" in the "now" and "IN THE FLESH".

That said, it is not necessary to be a faith participant to read Paul's grammar pertaining to life "in the flesh" in such a way as to make the echo in Hebrews perceptible.

Anyone can do that. It's an objective possibility. Can you perceive the echo?